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One's Own Good —And Another's

David Maurice



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By

David Maurice

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One's Own Good—and Another's

T

his is not an article about kamma and rebirth, but, in order to explain the Buddhist attitude to life and “social welfare,” an introductory explanation is necessary.

Quite often friends who are not Buddhists, and even those who are, but have either newly come to realise the truth of the Buddha's teaching or are Buddhists mainly because their fathers were, find their greatest difficulty in understanding the “long view” of Buddhism; and that what the Buddha discovered and taught to men was a complete cure for the disease of life and not a mere palliative.

It is largely because they do not accept the truth of kamma and rebirth, or only half accept it.

It is in the nature of things that kamma and rebirth should be so difficult of conscious acceptance. There are those who accept it because it was taught in early childhood and yet bury it below their level of conscious thought, together with half-formed fears and doubts that have arisen. There are those who will

resist any seeming proof of kamma and rebirth since they find it so totally different to all they have heretofore been told. They will accept the most absurd and impossible things as dogma, things that are not at all susceptible of proof and can but remain dogma, rather than give the slightest credence to the idea of rebirth.

Yet, taking it just for the sake of argument as a working hypothesis: it has never been disproved and cannot be disproved, and is so far the only hypothesis put forward that completely explains the facts. And it is, at least, the best working hypothesis there is for an understanding of man and his place in the universe.

There are those who know that kamma and rebirth are true but either find it impossible to say how they came by that knowledge, and therefore stand convicted in the eyes of the clever worldlings of self-hypnosis and 'leaky credulity', or whose knowledge, memory of previous existences, is at most valid only for themselves and still susceptible to the worldlings' view that it is self-hypnosis and imagination.

But first, perhaps, I should explain the sense in which I am using the word kamma, since it is a word that has been much misused. It is the same as the Sanskrit "karma" and I cannot do better than quote from the Buddhist Dictionary of the Venerable

Nyanatiloka: “karma (Skr.), Pali kamma: action, correctly speaking denotes the wholesome and unwholesome Volitions and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of beings. These karmic volitions become manifest as wholesome or unwholesome actions by body, speech and mind. Thus the Buddhist term “karma” by no means signifies the result of actions, and quite certainly not the fate of man, or perhaps even of whole nations (the so-called wholesale or mass-karma), which misconceptions through the influence of theosophy have become widely spread in the West.”

It is in the sense of this meaning, and as a convenient shorthand, that I use the term. There have been other booklets in the “Wheel” series dealing with kamma and with rebirth, and these give an idea of the Buddhist placement of value, and should be studied by those who find it difficult to understand “the long view”. [1]

This long view we see as man, as every man and woman, as you, for instance, living not one life but millions: struggling in a vortex made by craving, by craving to have and craving not to have, by hate and ill will, by delusion and ignorance. In this, all beings, all men and women, you also, are conditioned by past deed, by deeds of bodily action, deeds of speech, deeds of thought; and conditioned by present deeds as

well; never for one moment the same being, never from one moment to another, another being. Indeed the changes in your “self” are so rapid that you can almost visualise the process as a sort of flowing “now”.

Against this terrible background of an infinity of suffering, ranging from unease to anguish, is a “way out” to something that is all that this vortex is not, and that we call simply, “nibbāna”.

So when a cultured Western lady asks, in all sincerity, and after surveying for a year or two the Asian scene, “Why are devout Buddhist laymen not so interested in social welfare as their Christian counterparts in Western countries?”; or on another level, with not so much opportunity of “surveying the scene”, a Western air-pilot asks: “Isn’t it bad to escape in “meditation”, to save oneself when there is so much good needing to be done in the world?”; or, on still another level, a pushing Western association of “good” men tries to bring Buddhist monks into social welfare work: the difference between a palliative and a cure must be stressed, and there must be some attempt to bridge the wide and difficult gulf of different outlook.

First of all, however, it must be stressed that there is nothing in the Buddha’s teaching against social

welfare, but very much the reverse. It must also be stressed that there are many devout Buddhist laymen actively and physically interesting themselves and engaging themselves in social welfare, and making a good job of it.

That is not always immediately apparent to the Western visitor, who sees so much to be done and expects to see people running round “organising” things and other people. In Asia, generally, a great deal is being done, perhaps a little less noisily than it is done in some other places.

So much remains to be done in Asia, in all of Asia, not only in the Buddhist countries, because all of Asia had been disorganised by military or economic penetration, where it was not by both. But that is quite another story. The clock cannot be put back, nor can it, all circumstances considered, be speeded up too drastically, too quickly, without risking disaster. Those who know the circumstance see a very great deal being done while those who do not know, think nothing is happening. The digression is necessary lest you should get a wrong idea from what follows.

It must be mentioned also that it is the Buddhist feeling of mettā (loving kindness to all) that in truly Buddhist countries has ensured that there is a degree of social welfare right “from the grass roots” and

springing from the heart, and ending in practical help that, because it is unregimented and unorganised, is not always so apparent to the casual onlooker. This is not at all to say that more of it is not needed or that it would not be better if a little better organised. But that also is another story.

Buddhist Bhikkhus and their Noble Work

Before going on to consider the Buddhist outlook that colours all of the way of life of bhikkhus and laymen, we should think of the duties and responsibilities entrusted to the bhikkhus by the Buddha. There were two, *dve dhurāni*, two burdens or responsibilities: *ganthadhura* and *vipassanādhura*.

The first of these is the responsibility of study in order to learn the teaching and be able to transmit and keep alive the teaching.

The second is the responsibility of practising mental development for insight-knowledge so that the teaching may be the better kept alive, so that the influence of one himself wholly freed may be to the benefit of many.

For the Buddha had said in the Eighteenth Discourse of the Majjhima Nikāya:

“But, Cunda, that one who himself is in the mire should pull out of the mire another sunk therein—this, verily, is an unheard-of thing.

“But that one himself clear of the slough should be able to lift out of the slough another foundered therein—such a thing may well be. And that one who himself is not subdued, not disciplined, has not attained to the extinction of delusion, should cause others to become subdued, and disciplined, to attain to the extinction of delusion—such a thing has never been known. But that one, himself controlled, trained delivered from delusion, should lead others to become controlled and trained, lead them to deliverance it on delusion—such a thing may very well be”.

And he had also pointed out the advantage of helping the many, to a critic who thought that such a practice conduced but to welfare of oneself:

“Now, master Gotama, he who goes forth as wanderer from this or that family, from the home to the homeless life, tames only the single self, calms only the single self; leads to nibbāna only the single self. So what I say is, thus he is proficient in practice of merit that affects only one person, as a result of his going forth.”

“Well, brahmin, as to that I will question you. Answer as you think fit. Now what think you,

brahmin? In this connection a Tathāgata arises in the world, an arahat who is a fully enlightened one, perfect in knowledge and practice, well-farer, world-knower, incomparable charioteer of men to be tamed, teacher of devas and mankind, a Buddha, an exalted one. He says thus: ‘Come! this is the way, this the practice, proficient in which I make known that incomparable bliss which is steeped in the holy life, by my own powers of comprehension realising it. Come you also! Practise so that you too may be proficient therein, so that you too by your own powers of comprehension may realise it and abide therein.’

“Thus this teacher teaches Dhamma and others too practise to attain that end. Moreover there are many hundreds, many thousands, many hundreds of thousands of such. Now what think you brahmin? Since this is so, is it a practice of merit affecting only one person or many persons; that is, the result of going forth?”

It will be readily understood that there is a set responsibility for a bhikkhu, and it is for this that the yellow robe is donned. This is the highest possible service to mankind.

The first nine of the “twenty-one wrong kinds of occupation for a bhikkhu” deal, seven of them with administering medical treatment of one sort or

another and two with going on errands or performing duties at the behest of laymen, and naturally this precludes the type of social service envisaged by the good organisation referred to above.

It may be asked in one of those hypothetical questions that some folk love to purr: "If a bhikkhu saw man dying, should he not pause and save him if he could?" The answer is, of course, in the affirmative as the rules were not made, as some modern rites are, to be enforced against reason and loving kindness.

The Buddha once pointed out to a group of monks who in their intentness on gaining the "higher things" were neglecting one of their number who was seriously ill, that they should look after each other in such respects. He was very emphatic about this.

However, if a bhikkhu has it in his heart to go round tending the sick as an occupation, that is a totally different matter. His rules and common sense alike demand that he disrobe and do the noblest work a layman can.

Palliative or Cure?

The position of the devout Buddhist layman is different. He may, and very certainly where possible should, do as much in public service and social

welfare as he can until he feels that he can do something better. Then he will—very likely, though not necessarily, become a Bhikkhu.

But even here there is a difference in outlook from that of the average Western man of good-will.

Nothing so highlights the difference in thinking of the pure materialist, the devout theist, and the Buddhist, as the outlook in respect of suffering.

A very recent controversy in England widely reported in the world press helps to make the relative positions and viewpoints clearer.

A certain doctor reported that he gave a fatal dose of drugs, at the request of the patient, to a woman suffering from incurable cancer.

The pure materialists said: "Quite right, saves the State a great deal of wasted effort and puts her out of her misery."

The theists were rather divided about it all. One Christian church had three views: one of its leaders applauded the doctor's action; another disagreed and said that drugs should not be used to end life; a spokesman for the church said there was no "official" view and that "any attempt to make one would be keenly contested".

Other theists had other views. "If it were not God's

will that she should suffer” said one, “she would not suffer, and one should not interfere with God’s will”.

The logical conclusion to this seems to be that even were the cancer curable, it should not be cured; although there are, others who would regard themselves as “God’s informants” to cure suffering. The same view extended can “justify” those who regarded themselves as God’s instruments to burn heretics at the stake.

Of the pure materialist and the theist, it is the former who is logical. If he postulates this life ends entirely at death, then the materialist position is the only logical and correct one. Its extension to the killing of, whether they wish it or not, of badly injured, extremely weak and very old people, is also correct and logical.

The theist finds it hard to be consistent because nowhere ever has “God”, any god, clearly and unequivocally expressed his will in such matters.

The cancer patient, in the case in question, was stated to have “made her peace with God” and was presumably satisfied that she would go to “heaven”. According to her light, and those of the doctor if he is a fellow believer, her position and his are logical and correct.

There are billions of thought-moments in the time it

takes to blink one's eyes, so fantastically rapid is the stream of thought, and if her last thought-moment was one of peace and set on a "heaven state" she would, indeed enter that state temporarily. But as to her last thought-moment, only the being she has since become would know that, possibly, but not surely, for at that time it is rare for memory to be strong.

Take another angle. A recent conference on family planning in a thickly populated Asian country concluded that there must be birth control. A report of this in an Asian magazine featured several photographs of participating Westerners. It can hardly be by coincidence that they all looked very unhappy people, though one could hardly decide whether they were unhappy because they were advocating Asian birth control or were advocating Asian birth control because they are unhappy.

It seems though that one must ask "*Cui bono*"—whose good?

The biologists, the more cynical among them, are already saying that Asians of the intellectual classes are accepting some measure of birth control, and that those of the less advanced classes refuse it. They argue that this will produce a lowering of the intellectual population and the less intellectual will increase still. That is yet another story.

The doctors for a research in population problems of an American university say: "At the beginning of what is called the atomic age our world has approximately 2,850 billion people. If population were to continue to increase at the 1958 rate of 1.8 percent it would amount to nearly six billion at the end of the present century. In about eight centuries from now there would be one person per square foot of the world's area, including its deserts, mountains and oceans. This of course would be an impossible situation". [2]

Another alternative that has been suggested, but which nobody has dared to emphasise, is to "dispose of eugenically" and "put out of their misery" all people who reach a certain age. Indeed it has only been suggested as a possibility, a necessary possibility, of the future.

In all countries men are frantically working on problems of nutrition, and of irrigating deserts and, in the Arctic, clearing laneways through ice-bound seas to make possible easier food transport and open up new country for the production of food.

Men are beginning to see that without waiting for the eight centuries to pass, without waiting even for the end of this century, sufficient food for all is going to be a problem calling for solution either by a wholesale massacre, by a world government

outlawing unlicensed birth, or by a concerted effort to produce more food including synthetics that take up smaller space; and the conditioning of mankind to a smaller intake, i.e. to the digestion and efficient metabolism of a smaller bulk to maintain life. In such case there would arise again problems that would make today's "good" the "bad" of tomorrow. One, for instance, could visualise the world government overriding the "reactionary religious scruples" of a large portion of India's population and demanding the slaughter of all cows (except those permitted to zoos) as unwieldy and inefficient wasters of food and cumberers of the earth's surface, since synthetics could be used so much better than meat, butter and milk.

This is but a digression and this is very serious: one cannot arrive at a conception of good without "looking before and after". It introduces the question of palliative or cure.

The Long View

What do you believe really? Do you really and sincerely and consistently believe "with your whole heart" that merely by a fortuitous set of circumstances and without any volition on your part, at any time in the past, you have come to be what you are now? And are you consistent enough to believe, without any

doubts, that therefore, when you die, maybe before you have finished reading this or maybe shortly after, there is nothing left behind but your rather small impact on infinity?

Or do you believe that what you are now has been due partly to your own volition and power since birth? If so, from what age? If you believe this, what percentage of your present personality is due to "You"? If "You" is not a flux that changes moment by moment, what is it?

If you believe in the coming-to-be of "you" by chance accidents (such a very different you, if you look at yourself in the mirror, than the "you" at birth) and that therefore you owe nothing to the past as far as "you" are concerned, and that on the death of the "you" (such a different "you" if you live a few years longer, than the present "you") there will be nothing left of "YOU", why are you worried enough to read this?

Communists, as well as quite a few people who are certainly not communists, make much of the idea of "the good of the world", and of "posterity"—but there was a very great deal of truth actually in the exclamation of Sir Boyle Roche: "Posterity! Why should we consider posterity? What has posterity done for us?"

That is of course in relation to the purely materialist idea. If one postulates “a loving father in heaven” and “brotherhood of man”, with the loving, and only occasionally angry, father keeping an eye on his sons from time to time, one may have a different idea.

Here one must be consistent and admit that even if one postulates such a father, and the very word shows the origin and the wish, one must consider that, even granted the independent existence of a father, there are two things that follow:

(a) the “father” must also be a changing flux, since the minds of men that “know him”, even the minds at their peak, the minds of the mystics in supramundane trance, are themselves a flux;

(b) it is these minds that do most of the creating, and that in any case colour all they contact, so that even if the mind of man has not “created God in its own image,” it has at least draped all the attributes on a very bare skeleton. One can see this from the fact that by all accounts the father has, like the best of men short of the arahats, a divided mind and so is slightly schizophrenic. As Goethe was constrained to write: *“Nemo Contra Deum nisi Deus ipse”*—“There is nobody against God unless it be God himself”.

So whatever extreme view you take, either of there being nothing beyond this life, or of an omnipotent

creator who has made all things, you are unable to find any sure cure for your own ills, let alone for those of the world; and you may as easily as not do harm in your attempts to do good.

For a man who cannot swim at all to jump into the deep sea to save another who is drowning, is not an act of bravery but an act of foolishness. If he can swim a little and takes the calculated risk of being drowned himself but takes the risk because he has at least a chance of upholding the drowning man for a brief period until coming help arrives, he is acting bravely and wisely.

There is a story told by Voltaire of a young traveller who fell in with a strange old man as travelling companion. One evening they were charitably taken in by a poor widow who gave them lodging and fed them without charge from her scanty store. Her hospitality extended to sending her only son, a boy who would support her in her old age, as guide for part of the way.

When they came to a bridge across a rocky and swift-flowing stream, the strange old man suddenly seized the boy and pushed him off the bridge into the raging torrent below where he was dashed against the rocks and killed.

The young man exclaimed in horror and thought his

old companion was a devil, but the old man then appeared as a deva and told the young man that he had repaid the widow for her kindness and hospitality by saving her from heartbreak and a horrible death, as the young boy, had he lived, would have stolen and got her into serious trouble, finally murdering her.

The reverse of this moral is that much of the good we do has evil results and it behoves us to get wisdom first. To do this, we must find out what we are. That does not at all mean that we should let our thoughts run round in circles. That way lies no release, as the Buddha pointed out:

“And of his foolishness he ponders thus: ‘Have I verily been in bygone times or have I not been? What have I been in those bygone times? How have I been in bygone times? What was I before I became what I was in the far distant past? Shall I verily be in far-off days to come or shall I not be? What shall I be in those far-off days to come? How shall I be in the far-off days to come? What shall I be before I become what I shall be in the far distant future?’ The present also supplies him with matter for doubt, and he asks himself: ‘Am I now or am I not? and if I am, what am I and in what way? This present being—whence has it come and whither is it going?’

“And with such cognitions he arrives at one or other

of the following six views, the which becomes his solemn and settled conviction: either the view, 'I have a self', or else the view, 'I have not a self', or the view, 'by self I apprehend self', or the view, by self I apprehend non-self', or else the view, by non-self I apprehend self'. Or perhaps he adopts the view: This identical self of mine, I maintain, is veritably to be found, now here, now there, reaping the fruits of its good and of its evil deeds; and this, my self, is a thing permanent, constant, eternal, not subject to change, and so abides for ever'. But this, bhikkhu, is a walking in mere opinion, a resorting to mere views; a barren waste of views; an empty display of views. All this is merely to writhe, caught in the toils of views. Held thus fast to the bonds of views the uninstructed man of the world remains unfreed from birth, growth, decay, and death; is not delivered from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; in brief, he obtains no release from suffering."

The first thing to find is that we are not "I" or "you", and that can be found by realising, by fully realising, Impermanence.

"Just as, brethren, of all starry bodies whatsoever, the radiance does not equal one-sixteenth part of the moon's radiance, just as the moon is reckoned chief of them; even so is it with the perceiving of impermanence. Just as, brethren, in the autumn

season, when the sky is opened up and cleared of clouds, the sun, leaping up into the firmament, drives away all darkness from the heavens, and shines and burns and flashes forth; even so, brethren, the Perceiving of impermanence, if practised and enlarged, wears out all sensual lust, wears out all lust for body, all desire for rebirth, all ignorance, wears out, tears out, all conceit of 'I am'.

“And in what way, brethren, does it so wear them out?

“It is by seeing: Such is body, such is the arising of body, such is the ceasing of body, such is feeling, perception, the activities, such is consciousness, its arising and its ceasing”

“Even thus practised and enlarged brethren, does the perceiving of impermanence wear out all sensual lust, all lust for body, all desire for rebirth, all ignorance, wears out all conceit of 'I am'.”

But let us see how long is the long view. The Buddha pointed out more than two thousand five hundred years ago that there exist countless galaxies with their suns and planets and moons and stars, lying in every direction round this universe. This, which was “fanciful” to the West a hundred years ago, modern

science is now learning how to prove, having seen that it is sober fact.

As for time, no better picture of its duration can be shown than the one given by the Buddha. “Just as, if there were a mighty mountain crag four leagues in length, breadth, and height, without a crack or cranny, not hollowed out, one solid mass of rock, and a man should come at the end of every century, and, with a fine cloth of Benares, should once on each occasion stroke that rock; sooner would that mighty mountain crag be worn away by this method, sooner be used up, than the aeon.

“Thus long is the aeon: of aeons thus long many an aeon has passed away, many hundred aeons, many a thousand aeons, many a hundred thousand aeons.”

The Buddhist Layman and “Social Service”

Let us try to pull the threads together. We have seen that the work of a Buddhist bhikkhu is more noble and more necessary than social service but that social service is a noble and necessary occupation from the Buddhist standpoint for a dedicated layman.

A layman may be both in the world and of it. He

can, and should, also, be strenuous in attempting to leave the world behind. If he is set entirely upon the higher life, he may become a bhikkhu, just as a bhikkhu who feels a greater necessity to perform social service than to do those things for which the noble Order was instituted, may become a good and devout layman.

A devout Buddhist layman will first of all keep the five precepts. Even by just doing that, he is setting an example to others visibly, and in more subtle ways, an example that is never without influence for good. "They also serve who only stand and wait."

By going further, by practising the four brahma vihāras, the active, intense, radiation of loving kindness, compassion, joy in the achievements and gains of others, and tranquillity, tranquillity for himself and others. He is influencing many for good, in perhaps too subtle a way to be realised in full even by himself.

By going further still and practising *vipassanā bhāvanā*, mental development for insight-wisdom, he is influencing all of existence.

This practice is by no means "escapist". The man who lulls himself with alcohol, tobacco or even good books, good paintings and good music, is thereby escaping, in some degree, from reality; but the man

who is facing reality, and that is the beginning of the practice, is doing the very opposite. It is the first who is negative, and the second who takes the positive approach really. In this way, always bearing in mind the long view, a man is doing more than he could ever do in his endeavours to be “his brother’s keeper”.

That does not at all mean that he should not do all that he can to help all sentient beings, physically and materially as well as in other ways. The Buddha, as usual, put it in a clear and rational way.

On a certain occasion the Exalted One was staying among the Sumbha, at Desaka, a district of Sumbhā.

On that occasion the Exalted One addressed the monks, saying:

“Once upon a time, monks, a bamboo acrobat set up his pole and called to his pupil, Medakathālikā, saying:

“Now, you climb the pole and stand on my shoulder’.

“All right, master,’ replied the Pupil to the bamboo acrobat and climbed the pole and stood on the master’s shoulder.

“Then said the master to his pupil: ‘Now, Medakathālikā you watch me and I’ll watch you.

Thus watched and warded by each other, we'll show our trick, get a good fee and come down safe from the bamboo pole.'

"At these words Medakathālikā the pupil replied:

"No, no! That won't do, master! You look after yourself and I'll look after myself. Thus watched and warded, each by himself, we'll show our trick, get a good fee and come down safe from the bamboo pole. That's the way to do it.'" Then said

the Exalted One; "Now monks, just as

Medakathālikā the pupil said to the master: 'I'll look after myself' so ought ye to observe the station of mindfulness which means "I'll ward myself', likewise that which means 'we'll ward another.' By warding oneself, monks, one wards another. By warding another one wards himself.

"And how, monks, by warding oneself does one ward another?

"It is by following after, by cultivating, by making much of him.

"And how, monks by warding another does one ward himself?

"It is by forbearance, by harmlessness, by goodwill, by compassion towards him. That, monks, is how he wards himself.

“Monks, ye must observe the station of mindfulness which means: ‘I ward another’. It is by warding self, monks, that one wards another.

“It is by warding another that one wards himself”.

It should perhaps be explained that these bamboo-acrobats perform various feats, such as the master balancing the pupil on his chest and the pupil climbing the pole and balancing on the top. Were one to neglect for a moment the business in hand, his own side of it, it might easily spell disaster to both.

By protecting oneself well, taking the long view and the moral outlook, the knowledge and wisdom, to realise that morality and loving kindness are the best way of guarding oneself, one guards others, influencing the world even if one is far from the world.

If one takes the long view and lives a purely moral life with sustained loving kindness to all, one thereby protects oneself in the best possible way, and guards others in the best possible way, influencing the world for good even if “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”.

This can perhaps be better understood if one thinks of the times when impending danger to a loved one

has been “felt” though divided by distance.

All but the most extreme extroverts have had such an experience, at least faintly. Mental development (*bhāvanā*) strengthens that bond, extends it, and enables one to influence for good all that lives and breathes. One then, in every way, physically where possible, as well as mentally, protects and guards others. This is the surest way to protect and guard oneself, as even the extreme extroverts are beginning to see, in this shrinking world which daily becomes more vulnerable to terrible destruction.

This article has necessarily been somewhat discursive but may help you to formulate some thoughts on the real and lasting goal of yourself and others, and of the Buddhist teaching thereon.

Notes

1. The Wheel No. 394, Part II: *Karma and Rebirth*, by Nyanatiloka Mahathera; and Wheel Nos. 12/13: *The Case for Rebirth* by Francis Story, [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Control by Fate or Foresight*, Pascal K. Whelpton [\[Back\]](#)

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